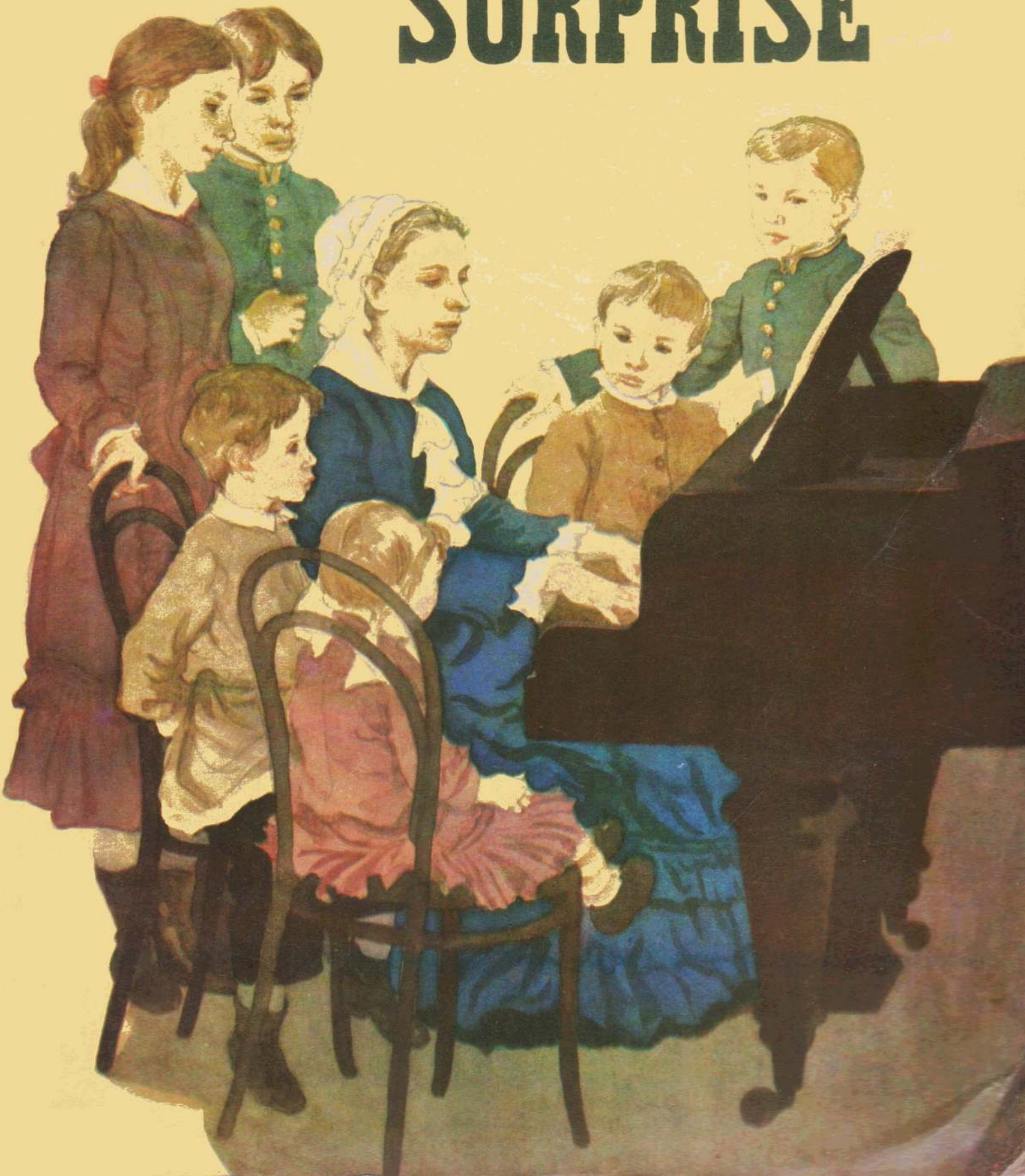
ZOYA VOSKRESENSKAYA

SURPRISE

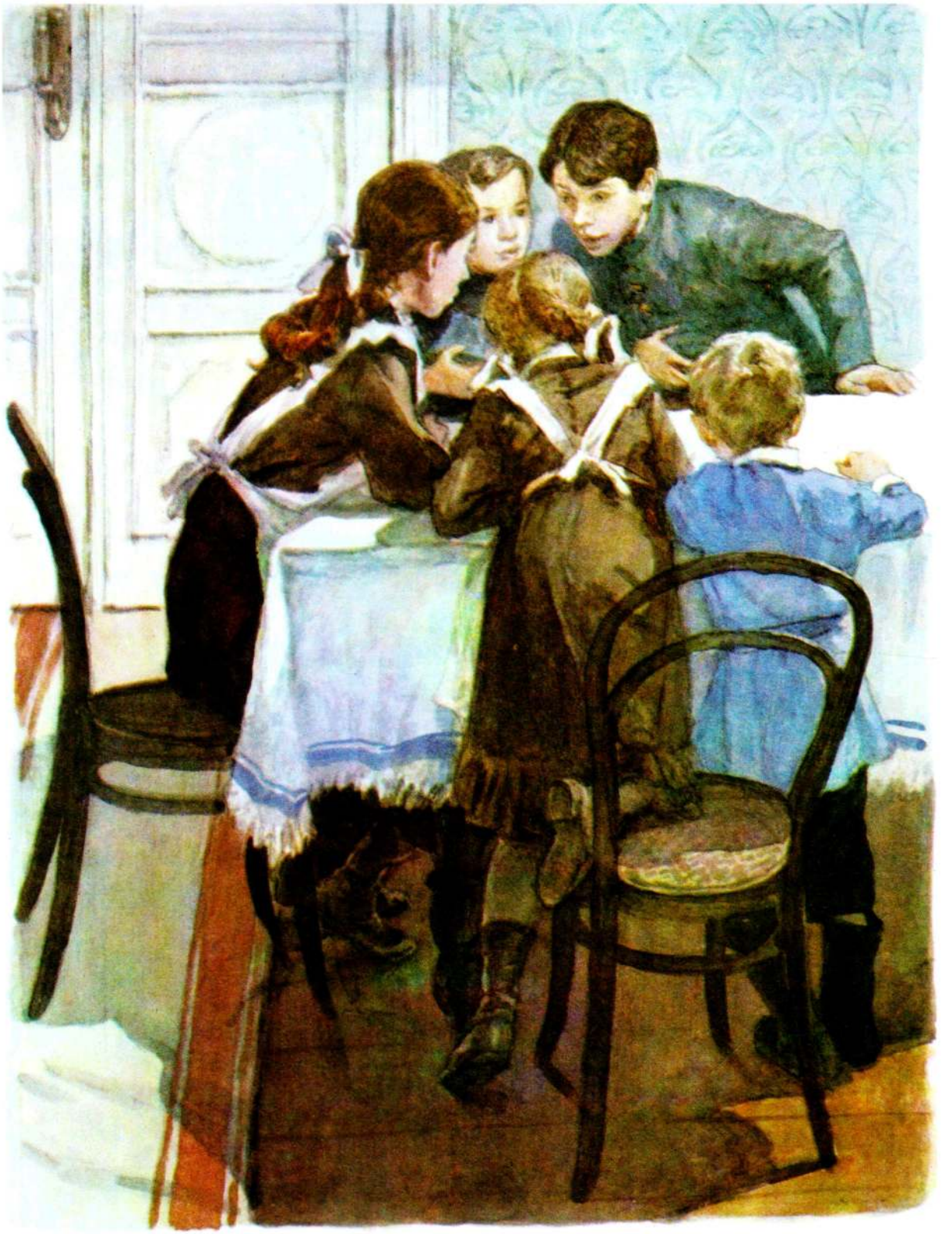


ZOYA VOSKRESENSKAYA

SURPRISE

Stories About the Ulyanov Family

PROGRESS PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW



SURPRISE

A strange being came to live in the attic of the Ulyanov house towards the end of February. The name of this strange being was Surprise. It was a restless sort, and made different noises — now whirring like a sewing machine, now squealing like a hand saw, now snorting like a fret saw.

The minute the children were left alone in the dining-room Surprise joined them and they all began to whisper together. It vanished when Mother appeared, and the children quickly resumed their seats, pretending nothing had happened.

The Surprise was safe with Anya, Sasha, Volodya and Olya. They had promised on their honour not to give it away to Mummy and Daddy. But there were Manyasha and Mitya to reckon with. Manyasha was only two, so she could be trusted not to talk, but Mitya was already six and he simply refused to have any secrets from Mummy.

One evening, unable to bear it any longer, he went up to his mother and whispered into her ear:

"Mummy, shall I tell you about Surprise? It's a secret."

"No, dear, I don't want to hear about it," she said. "Secrets must be kept, you must never give a secret away."

She stayed away from the children's attic kingdom in the evening lest she might run into Surprise. She sat in the dining-room, knitting and smiling to herself. When Anya asked if she might keep the money she had earned for lessons, her mother did not ask her what she needed it for. She did not even seem to notice that the sewing machine had moved to Anya's room. Father kept to his study where he tried to do some work, stopping his ears because Surprise was raising such a clatter upstairs.

At suppertime, the parents made no comment about the wood shavings caught in Volodya's curly hair, the bits of coloured thread stuck to Olya's dress, and the paint smeared all over Mitya's face. And strangely, Daddy never suggested a game of chess to Sasha now.

The clock alone had no consideration to spare the children. Surprise or no Surprise, it struck nine when it had to, telling them it was bedtime.

The sixth of March — Mother's birthday — was fast approaching.

The night before the big day it was imperative for Surprise to come down from the attic, and the parents very tactfully went out to visit friends.

Sasha and Volodya got busy polishing the floors and cleaning their own and their sisters' shoes until they shone like glass. Anya and Olya

starched and ironed fresh white shirts for the boys, and ribbons for their own hair, while Mitya tidied up their toy boxes.

Manyasha alone was at a loose end, and to keep her happy Olya let her play with her Surprise.

Everything was ready, minutes remained before their parents came home, and then the blow fell!

Olya came running to Anya, and sobbed out the terrible news: "Look, look what Manyasha has done! And where on earth did she get the scissors!"

Anya gasped, and together they ran to their brothers for help. When Volodya saw Olya's tear-stained face, he took his handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped the tears away.

"Don't cry," he comforted his dearest playmate. "Sasha will find a way."

Nothing could distress Sasha, and even here, when everybody thought Surprise was ruined beyond recall, he thought of a way out. He drew the pattern, Anya matched the threads to embroider it with, and Volodya threaded several needles for Olya who stopped crying and quickly got down to work. Her Surprise became all the prettier now.

On March the 6th, Mother stayed in bed longer than usual and did not get up until after the children had gone to school, not to spoil their Surprise for them.

Lessons seemed to drag forever that day. When the bell rang at long last, Sasha and Volodya hurried to the girls' school to meet their sisters, and they all ran home together. It was a lovely spring day, they all thought, with the sun shining so brightly and the streets dressed up in sparkling hoarfrost, while Volodya cocked an ear and found that the jackdaws sang as beautifully as starlings.

There was an air of festivity in the house.

Mother, dressed in her Sunday best, sat in the dining-room with Father, waiting for the children to come home from school.

A jolly bustle was heard in the attic. And now the six children came down the stairs in pairs: Manyasha and Mitya headed the procession, next came Olya and Volodya, and then Anya and Sasha. Each carried his Surprise behind his back.

They entered the dining-room and stopped just inside the door. Six pairs of shining eyes gazed at Mother. She looked so specially lovely

today! Her blue dress with the white lace collar was so very becoming! Her sweet mouth was smiling, and there was a twinkle in her brown eyes. Father, dressed in his best frock coat, stood behind Mother's chair, beaming on his brood of children.

Anya came forward and spoke her piece in a ringing voice: "Our darling Mummy, we wish you a happy birthday, and we want you to be always healthy, happy, and smiling."

"Thank you, my dears, thank you," Mother said in a breaking voice, and tears rose to her eyes.

"Manyasha, it's your turn," Anya whispered to her baby sister.

Manyasha went running to her Mother and gave her the tiny bun she had shaped herself placed on a toy dish.

"It's for you," she said and quickly climbed in her mother's lap.

"Oh, how delicious!" Mother said, biting off a piece, while Manyasha stuffed what remained in her own mouth.

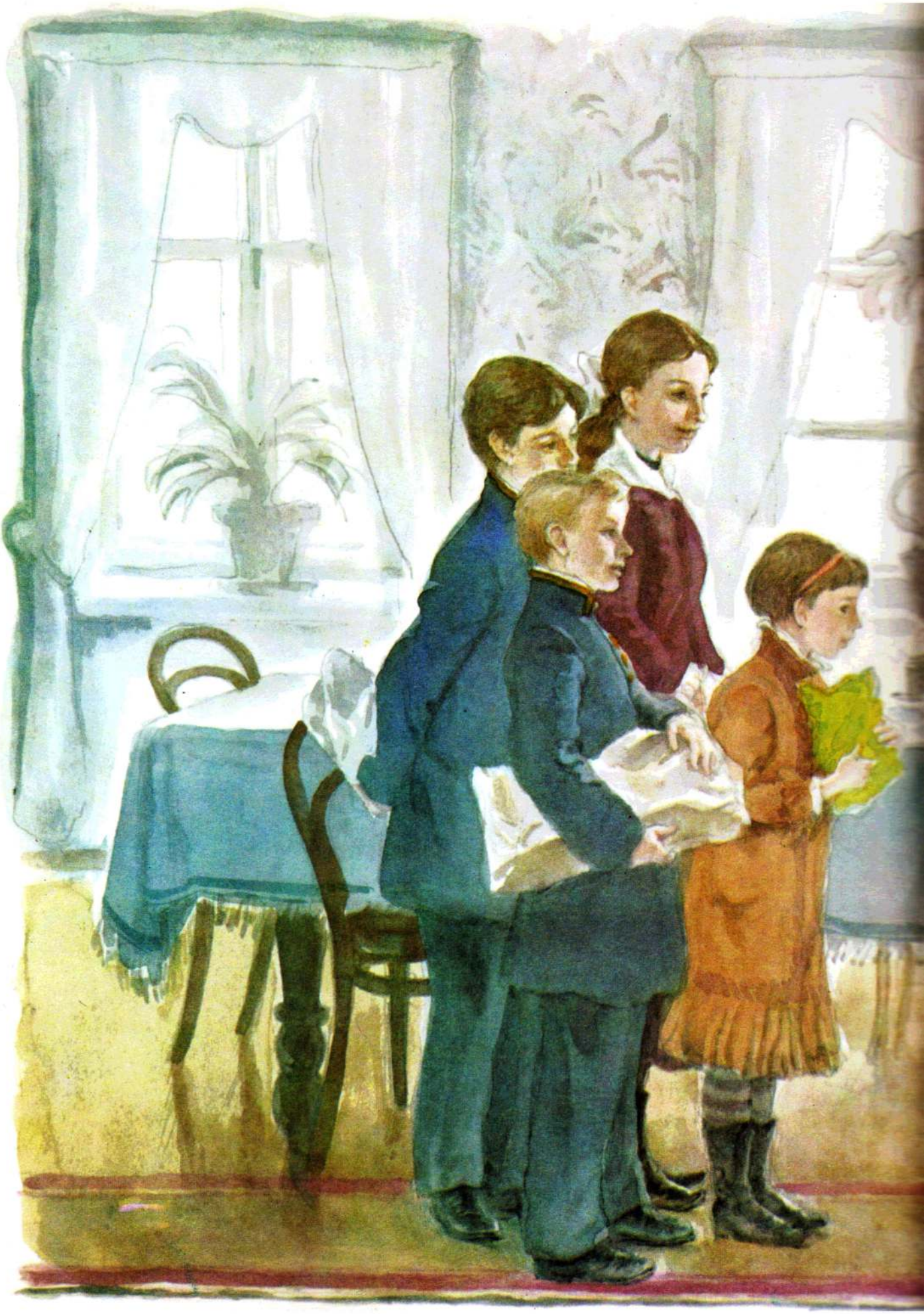
Mitya stepped forward, thrusting his lower lip out self-consciously. His Surprise was a birthday card on which he had himself written the words: "Dear Mummy, Happy Birthday, Mitya." The card was inserted in an envelope on which he had painted fantastic flowers and animals in the brightest and gayest colours he could find, putting all his skill and imagination into the design.

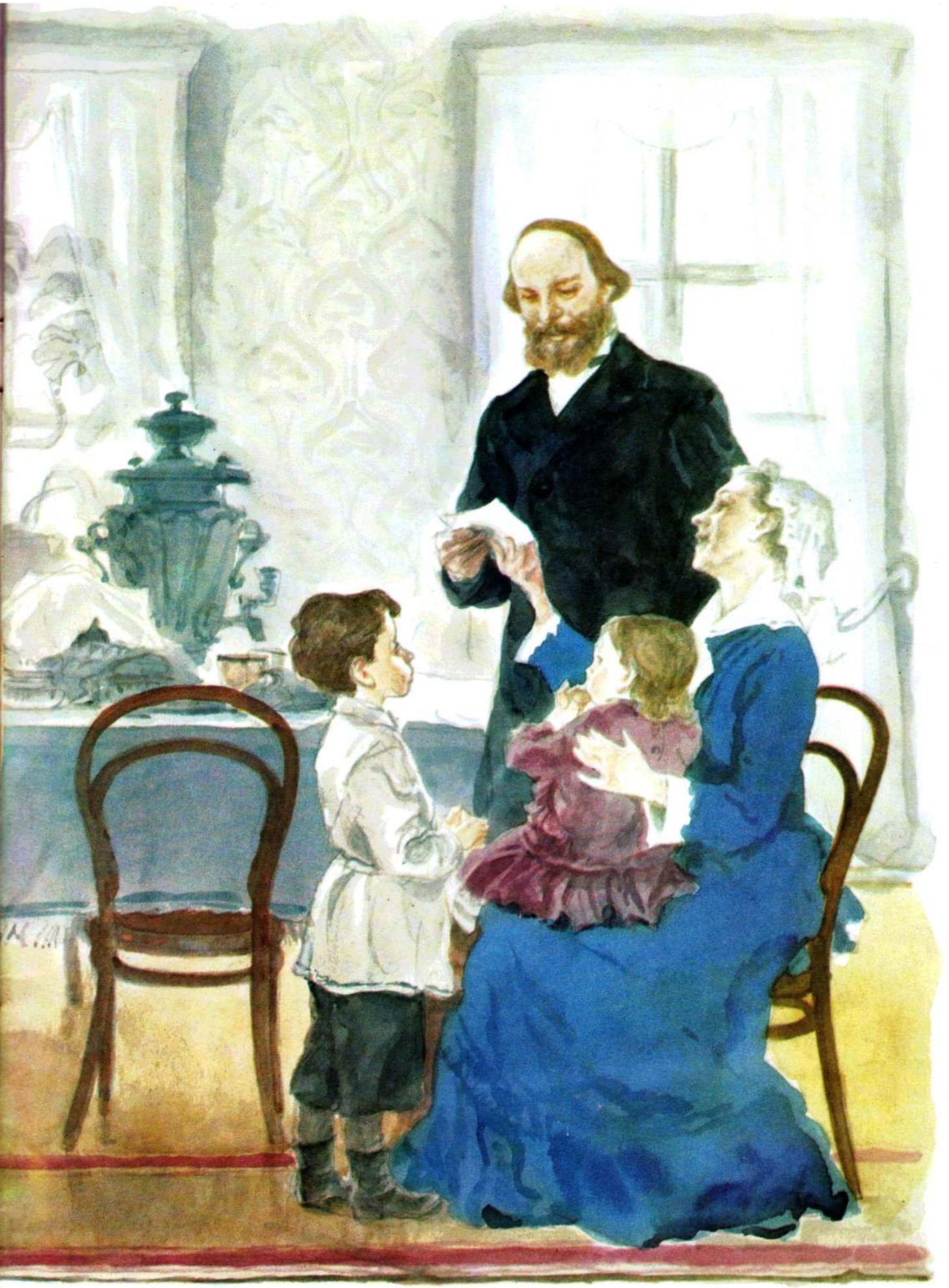
Mother read his card out loud, and handed it to Father, saying: "Look, what a wonderful card!"

Father, too, was delighted with Mitya's Surprise.

Now, Olya came and laid a small cushion on her mother's knees. There were field flowers embroidered on a green ground, and in the very centre there was a large red poppy.

"Oh, what a pretty little cushion!" Mother cried. "It is so like a real meadow in spring! The poppy is the best of all, it's so natural, it's as if the wind had turned back this petal."





Olya stopped worrying: that particular petal had been Sasha's brainwave to hide the hole snipped out by Manyasha. The culprit glanced at the cushion, and thrust her guilty face into her mother's bosom.

Volodya sighed. That cushion had overshadowed all the presents. Would Mother like his, he wondered? He placed on the table before her the small house he had made for the starlings.

"I'll fix this to the elm tree outside the kitchen window, Mummy. Starlings will come to live in this house and they'll sing you songs. They're coming soon, you know."

"Oh, how lovely!" his mother sounded delighted. "When I was a little girl we had one exactly like this outside the nursery window. I've been fond of starlings ever since. Thank you, Volodya dear."

Sasha unwrapped the white-paper parcel he was carrying and produced a small bread board which, using a fret saw and file, he had turned into a thing of real beauty with a trimming of sheer lace, an intricate design of twigs and leaves, and an elaborate edging.

"Why, it's a bread board," his mother gasped. "I need one very badly, but this one's so beautiful that I couldn't bring myself to cut bread on it. I'll treasure it very, very much."

And now it was Anya's turn. Her Surprise was a flannel blouse, as soft and yellow as a baby chick, and it was trimmed with a brown collar and cuffs. She had bought the flannel with her first earnings, and cut and made the blouse herself. Her mother tried the blouse on, and liked it so much that she hated parting with it.

A door banged at the back of the house. Father laughed and said:

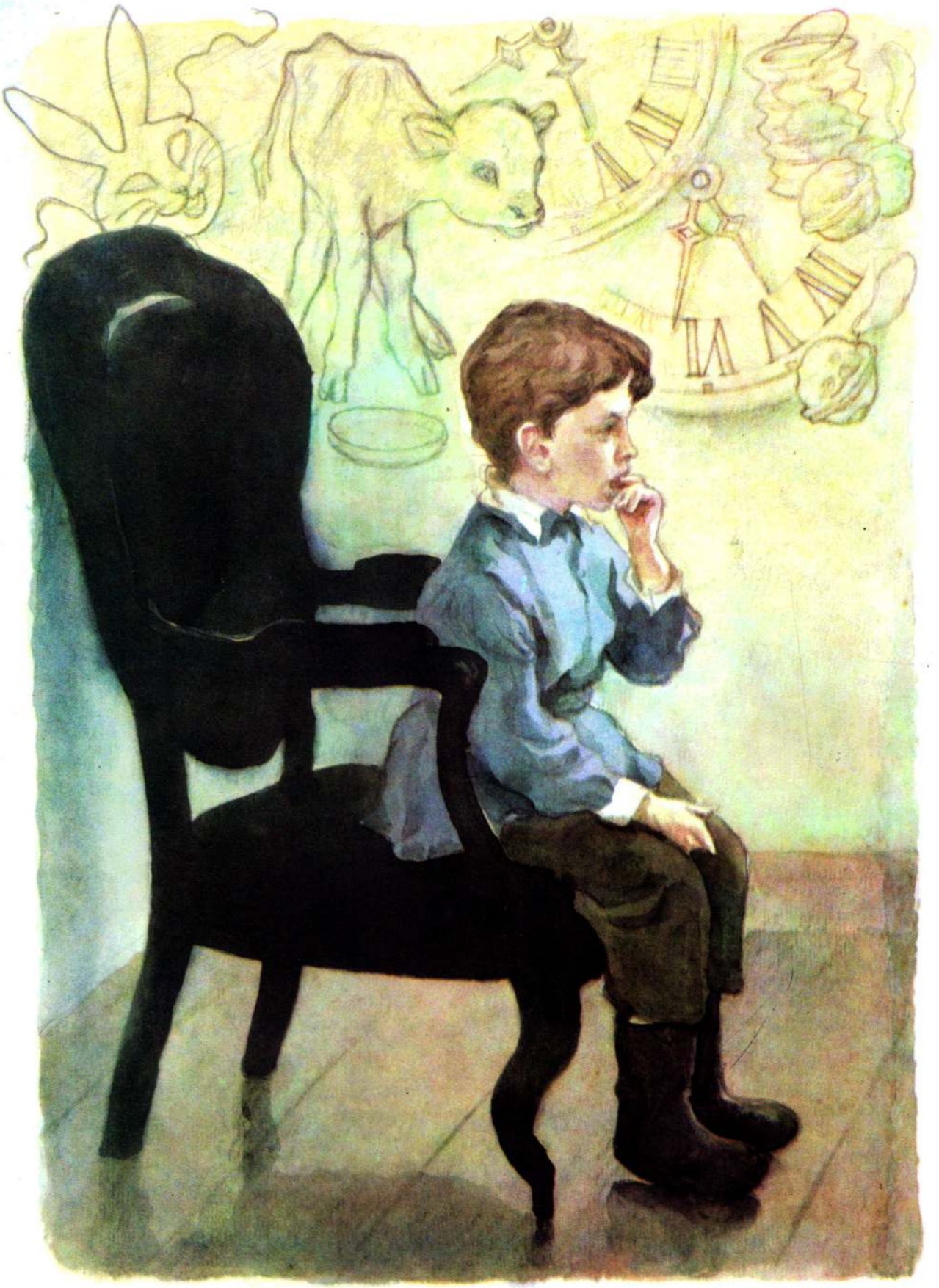
"That was Mister Surprise running away. There's nothing more for him to do here."

This sort of terminated the formal part of the ceremony, and the children became noisy and gay. The six of them took their seats at the table, with their mother presiding at the samovar, and their father sitting opposite at the other end.

"I have a surprise for all of us, too, for Mother's birthday," Father announced, opening a big envelope and taking out a photograph of the whole family.

The children remembered that blizzardy day in winter when they all went to the photographer's, they remembered what ages the man took to seat them all the way he wanted it, how he told them not to breathe or blink their eyes, and how frightened Manyasha was when he disappeared under the black cloth.

"How fortunate we are to have our Mummy," Father said. "She takes care of all of us and is very fond of us. Let us thank her for it and tell her how much we love her too."



THE OLD ARMCHAIR

There was an old leather armchair in Daddy's study. It always felt cold and uncomfy. Even on a very hot summer day it was unpleasant to the touch. That was why you had to sit there when you were punished. Make the slightest move and the armchair would creak angrily, as if it were scolding you too.

Mitya was sitting in the armchair listening to the ticking of the alarm clock. Mother used to put the alarm on music before, and the culprit knew that as soon as "The Birchtree in the Field" tune began to play his punishment was done and he was free to run off and play. But this

time she did not put the alarm on music. She simply told Mitya to sit in the armchair for thirty minutes, think about his conduct and learn the arithmetic lesson.

And Mitya did not feel like thinking.

He wanted to be in the dining-room where his brothers and sisters were making Christmas tree decorations. Mitya might also be wrapping walnuts in gold foil, and instead he was sitting here in this black armchair, and even the alarm clock would not tell him when he was free to go.

That morning the arithmetic teacher taught them how to tell the time by moving the tin hands on a cardboard clock. She asked Mitya what time she was showing, and he did not know, so she gave him a deuce. He did not know the answer because Beauty had calved the evening before. Mitya had stayed in the kitchen beside the baby calf until bedtime. The calf was so funny, he struggled to stand up no sooner he was born, and his long, weak legs slid apart and would not hold him. Mitya bent the calf's head down to the bowl of warm milk, dipped a finger in it and let him suck it. His tongue felt rough and ticklish. He had a pink nose with a dark, round spot between the nostrils, and his eyes were large and sad. He was unhappy without his mother, Mitya thought. And Beauty was unhappy too, mooing pitifully in the shed, and calling her baby calf.

Mother said that the children would feed the calf in turn, and that they were not to sit around him all the time. He had only just come into the world and he needed plenty of sleep.

When the others went to do their homework Mitya slipped back into the kitchen and went on feeding the calf. He could not wait to see him again, because maybe he had already learned to stand up on his spindly legs. And here Mitya had to sit in this old armchair and learn his arithmetic. He did not want to learn any silly arithmetic.

Mother told him to sit in the armchair for half an hour, and that he was free to go at a quarter to five.

Half an hour was thirty minutes. But how was he to know when it was a quarter to five?

He thought hard. There were lines and dots around the face of the clock.

Mitya knew that the distance between the dots meant one minute, and between the lines it was five minutes.

The big hand would stand still, as though taking aim, and then jump from one line to the next, while the small, fat hand did not seem to move at all.

Now where would the long minute hand be when the clock showed a quarter to five?

The door opened with a slight creak, and the funny face of Puss in Boots, wearing a large-brimmed hat with a feather, peeped in.

"Miaow!"

"Volodya, I know it's you. Come here and show me where the big hand will be when it's a quarter to five."

"Miaow, my dear boy, if I tell you you'll never learn your arithmetic lesson. Use your own brains. Miaow! Miaow!" And Puss in Boots vanished.

Mitya felt terribly sorry for himself. Would they have time to make the rabbit's mask for him now? He stared at the clock, breaking out into a sweat from the strain. Even the cold leather armchair felt hot now. He tackled the problem again and again, calculating where the minute hand had to be in order to set him free.

There was loud laughter in the dining-room next door. Manyasha's laughter rang the loudest. He could hear the calf lowing in the kitchen. They had probably forgotten to feed him. The hands on the clock had stopped moving altogether, the minute hand especially. Should he call Mummy, and tell her the clock had stopped?

He brushed away his tears because they would not let him see the clock properly. He sat and counted. He had seven more minutes to do. He had checked and double-checked his answer, so there could be no mistake.

There was the calf lowing again. Could he endure it for another seven — no, five — minutes?

Time never dragged so slowly anywhere as in this armchair. A whole day would be over before you knew it, and here, in this armchair, every minute dragged endlessly.

Now, all the long hand had to do was jump from the dot to the line, and then it would be a quarter to five. But the hand never stirred.

Mitya looked away for fear that he had hypnotised it with his stare.

"Mitya, what is the time?" his mother asked from the door.

The hand gave a start and jumped to the line against the figure 9.

"A quarter to five, Mummy. The half hour is over."

"Quite right," Mother said. "Have you thought over your conduct and learnt your arithmetic lesson?"

"No, I didn't have the time," Mitya admitted contritely. "I was so busy thinking when I'd be free to go."

"And what is the time now?"

"Thirteen minutes to five," Mitya answered smartly, with hardly a glance at the clock.

"Why, that's excellent," Mummy said. "You've learnt your arithmetic lesson well, I see."

Funny masks peeped from behind Mummy's back: Puss in Boots, Bruin the Bear — that would be Sasha, the Monkey — Olya, of course, and the laughing little bluebell was Manyasha.

ON A WINTER EVENING

Anya and Sasha were playing chess.

Daddy was working in his study. And Mummy and the younger children were preparing to go on an exciting "troika ride".

Only the wall lamp over the grand piano was on in the drawing-room, and the larger part of the room was in semidarkness. The windows were covered with rime, but indoors it was warm and cosy with the logs crackling merrily in the hall stove.

Volodya kept running to the dining-room and back to the drawing-room, undecided what to choose. He very much wanted to

play a game of chess with Sasha, but the "troika ride" was great fun too.

"All right," he agreed to the wheedling of the younger children. "I'll stay and play, but only on condition that I'll be the coachman."

Mother, Olya and Mitya pushed four chairs together to make the sleigh. Manyasha's high chair was placed in front as a coach-box, and the wide armchair with the ornamental three-tipped crest on the back made a perfect troika of blacks.

Volodya harnessed the horses: he wound lengths of rope round the crest, and tightened the belly band. The horses had become restive, they were dying to be off. The coachman snapped at them crossly.

Mother and Manyasha settled down in the back, while Olya and Mitya took the front seat. Olya wrapped herself up in a woolly shawl, Mitya put on his hood, and Manyasha her bonnet. They had a long way to go, and the cold was really fierce in the open country. The coachman pulled his belt tight, put on his mittens, and asked in a deep voice:

"Where to, madam?"

"Today we'll take a trip to the Land of Kindness and Joy," Mother replied. "Do you know the way there?"

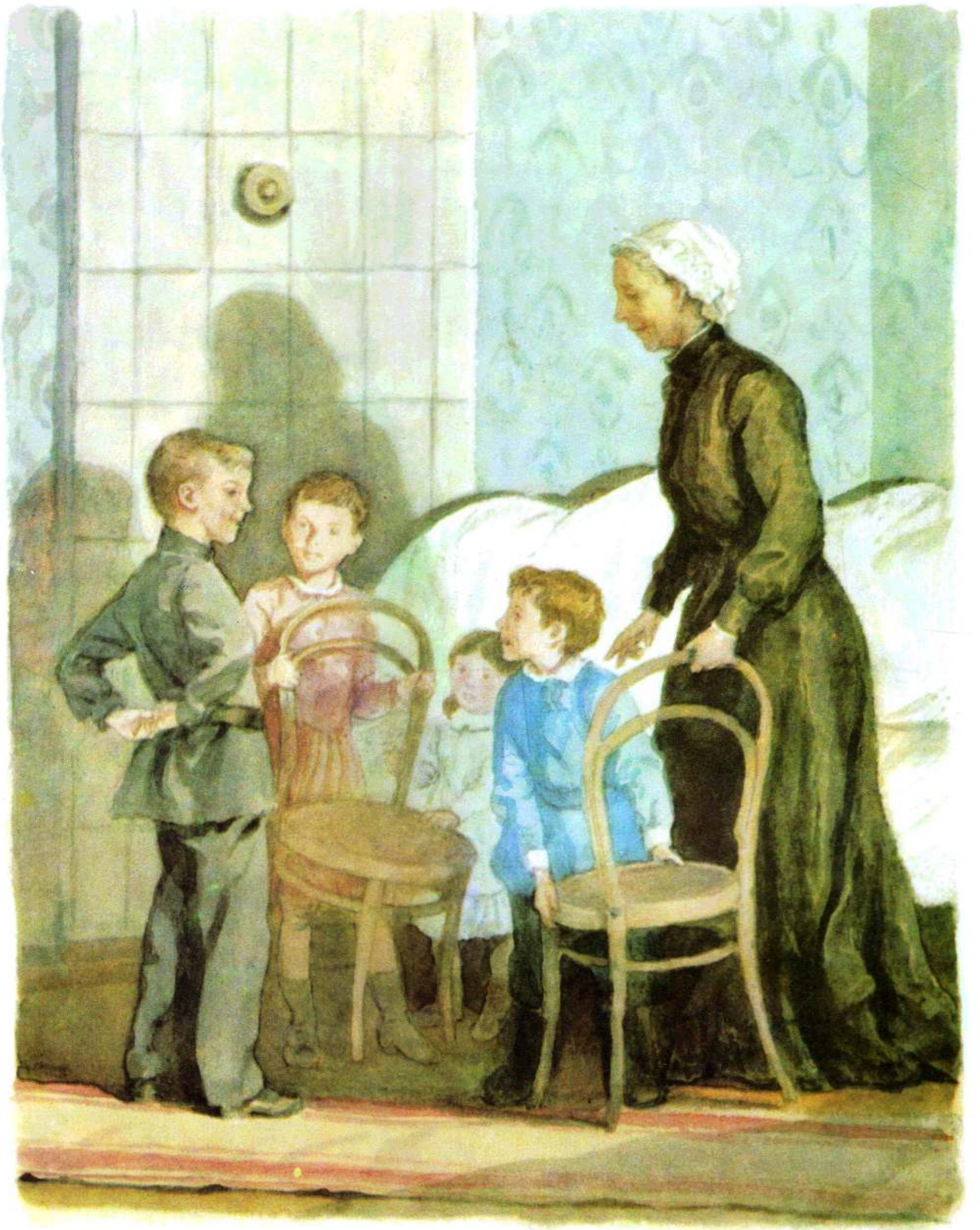
"I know the way alright," Volodya said after some thought. "But the road there is fraught with dangers."

"Oh yes, the road will not be easy," Mother said. "We'll encounter many obstacles and hazards. But, let us go, and Godspeed."

"Whoa, my good blacks, whoa!" Volodya urged the horses, swinging his whip.

"A blizzard is starting up, so wrap yourselves up properly, children," Mother told them.

Olya pulled the shawl down to the very eyes, Mitya wound the ends of his hood once more round his neck, and Manyasha tugged her bonnet down as far as it would go.



"Look at the fir trees lining the road, look how fluffy they are, muffled in snow to keep from freezing. And that tree on the hill over there looks really pink," Mother pointed to the frost-encrusted window. "It's the light of the setting sun falling on it."

"Look, look," cried Olya. "The sun has turned so red that you can look straight at it!"

"A sign of foul weather," growled the coachman, and lashed at his troika.

Young Manyasha stared her eyes out to see the sun which Mummy and Olya were talking about.

"Oh, Manyasha, a little hare has jumped out from under that tree," Mother pointed in the direction of the rubber plant.

"I can't see any hare," Manyasha said in all simplicity.

"You can't?" Mitya asked, surprised. "There it is, sitting up and washing its face with its front paws."

"Is it a grey hare or a white hare?"

"It's white as snow, and its ears are pinkish," Olya added.

"I can see it now," Manyasha agreed meekly, stealing glances at the rubber plant. "Only its ears are green."

"Whoa, my good blacks, whoa!" Volodya shouted at his horses, now and again glancing over his shoulder at his passengers. "We are about to cross a river of fire which only the brave can get across. The cowards must get out now."

The children looked at their mother for assurance, and Mitya said in a quavering voice:

"Mummy, nurse wanted to give me a fright with a chicken feather yesterday. A huge, terrible shadow moved over the wall, but I closed my eyes tight and I almost was not scared."

"That made you a braver boy," Mother told him. "So you'll be well able to get across the river of fire."

Volodya turned round and looked hard at Olya.

"Maybe the young lady feels frightened and doesn't want to come any farther? See the red mist over the river, we're about to plunge right into the flames."

"I'm not frightened," Olya replied proudly.

Mitya hunched himself up and covered his face with his hands. The coachman whipped the horses on, and now they were in the midst of a roaring sea of fire, he was choked for breath, and the long tongues of fire were reaching for his face and hands.

"Whoa, get a move on, look sharp now!" The coachman lashed at the horses with all his might. "We've made it!"

Everybody drew a sigh of relief. Mitya knew for certain now that the moving shadow of a chicken feather was nothing to fear.

"If only we could drive past the Dragon's tower while it's still light," Mother said fretfully. "He can see only at night. He's got just one eye and it flares up when the moon rises."

"Coachman, dear, can we go past before dark?" Olya asked.

"We'll do our best," the coachman replied and reined his horses to a stop.

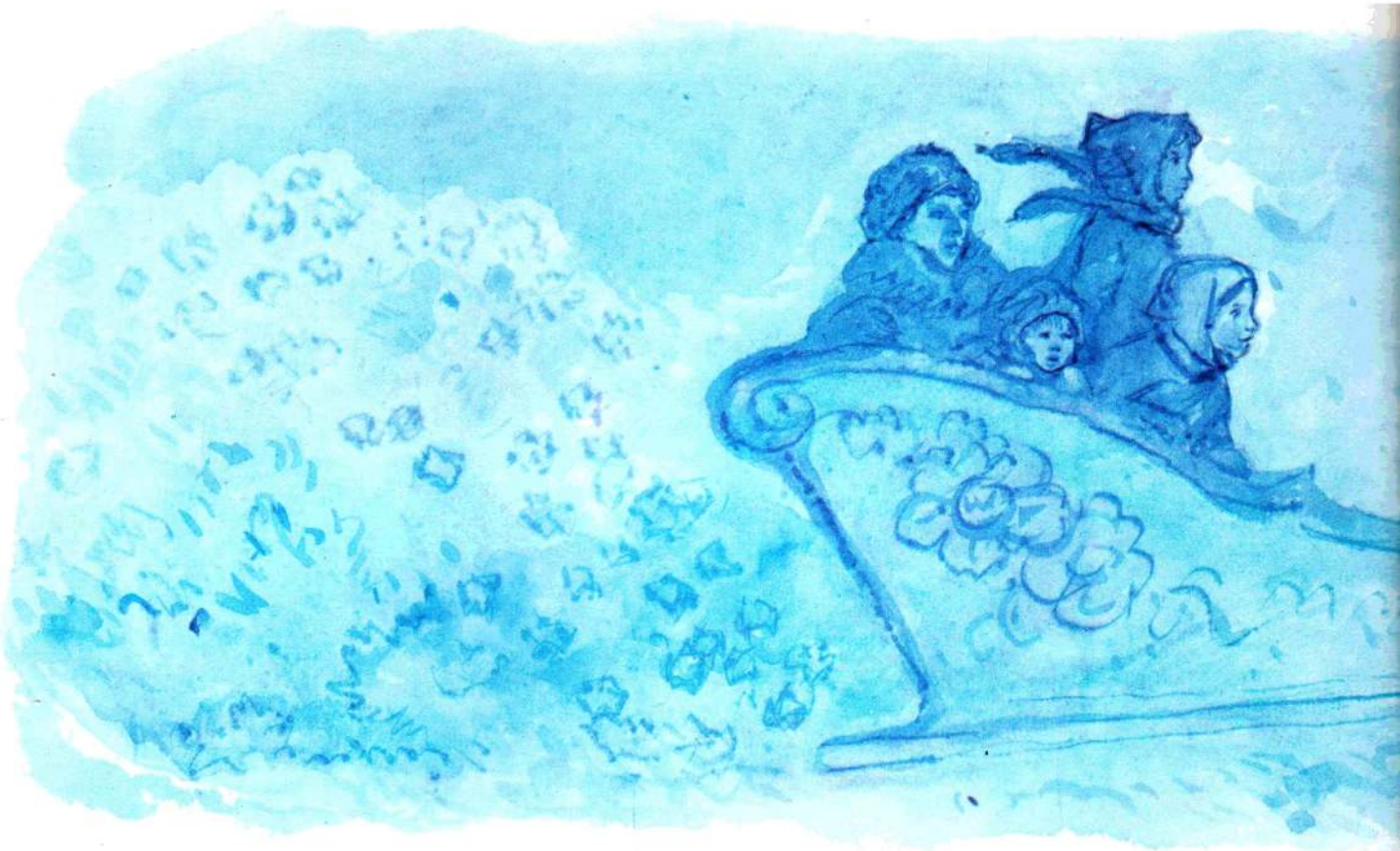
"Why have we stopped?" the passengers asked in a chorus of anxious voices.

"The trace-horse has become unharnessed. I'll just tighten the collar, clean the bells under the shaftbow so they'll jingle with a jollier sound, and then we'll move on." Volodya tightened the rope on the right-hand tip of the crest on the back of the armchair, climbed up into his box again, and they were off.

"See that magpie on the branch giving us a welcome?" Mitya said.

"And there's a fox biding its time under the tree, swishing its tail so nicely, the sly thing," Olya added. "Please, magpie, don't trust the fox...."

"I see a little squirrel climbing up a tree, climbing like our Olya," Manyasha now joined in the game.



"Look lively, my blacks, haven't you eaten enough oats?" Volodya cried and, turning to the passengers, told them: "Hold fast now, we are going to race downhill!"

The passengers clutched at the sides of the sleigh, they ducked their heads because the wind was flinging handfuls of snow into their faces and blinding them for a moment, but at last they were on level road again and the horses changed to an easy trot.

"The sun has set, the stars are out," Olya said dreamily, gazing at the ceiling.

"Do you see that great dipper overhead? What is it?" Mother asked.

"It's the Great Bear," Olya, Mitya and Volodya all spoke together.

"I want a teddy bear, I want a small bear," Manyasha began to whine.

"Here's one for you," Olya almost jumped for joy. "He's crawling out of the lair and rubbing his eyes. Can you hear him growling?"

"Oh, Mummy," Manyasha whispered in fright, and cuddled up closer to her mother.

"What are those dancing lights, does anyone know?" Olya asked, indicating the hall where the polished floor reflected the leaping flames in the stove.

"They are the lights in Daddy's schools," Mother told her.

"And what is that glow over the forest?"

"It's the glow from the crenelated wall of the Dragon's tower," Mother said and drew little Manyasha closer.

Suddenly, Olya gave a scream, tumbled off the chair and crawled away on all fours into the darkest corner of the room.

"Stop the horses, stop," Mother gripped the driver by the shoulders. "My little girl has fallen out of the sleigh."

With no little effort, the driver reined in the horses, jumped down from the box, tethered the horses to an imaginary tree and, shielding his eyes with a hand, plunged into the snowstorm to look for the girl.

Suddenly they heard a creepy, drawn-out howl.

"That's Volodya!" Manyasha cried, clapping her hands.

"No, it's a wolf," Mitya said. He bit hard on his finger and watched the coachman wide-eyed. "Olya is lying under a tree and the pack of wolves is going straight at her," he was near tears.

But the valiant coachman tore his way through the shrubs, sinking deeper and deeper into the snowdrifts. Even Manyasha began to worry and urge Volodya on.

He found the girl at last, almost frozen to death. He picked her up, put his arms round her shoulders, dragged her to the sleigh and began rubbing her hands with snow, while the wolves howled louder and louder.

"The wolves..." Olya moaned. "They almost ate me up. They're hungry and skinny, they gnash their teeth, and their eyes are like tiny green lights."

"One ... two ... three," Mitya counted the wolves. "Watch me kill them all." He raised his toy rifle shoulder high and took aim. "Bang! Got one, it's flailing its legs. Bang! The second one went rolling downhill."

"Bang!" the coachman cried, forgetting his part. "I got the third one, a huge old beast!"

"You can't, Volodya. You're the coachman, you have not got a rifle," Olya told him.

"He might well have taken a

rifle along on a journey like this," Mother objected. "We have a splendid coachman, he's brave and good. See, how clever he is with the horses? I do hope we'll get past the Dragon's tower safely. And after that we won't have far to go to our destination."

"Mummy, tell us about the Land of Kindness and Joy," the children wheedled. "What's it like?"

"It's a land inhabited by strong, handsome people. They do not know the meaning of the words untruth, cowardice and deceit. They have never known illness, hunger or war."

The coachman dropped his reins, turned round and watched his mother with shining eyes, his chin cupped in his hands.

"Mummy, but why can't they make everyone happy?"

"They will once the Dragon has been defeated."

"Volodya, you keep forgetting that you're the coachman," Olya scolded him. "Let's hurry, or we'll fall into the Dragon's clutches."

Volodya whipped the horses on, shouting at them and clicking his tongue. Suddenly, he swung round and said to his mother: "Madam, we cannot go on. Can you hear the horses snorting? A snowstorm has started up, I can't see a thing."

"Shall we turn back then?" Mother asked the children.

"No, no, no!" cried Olya, Mitya and Manyasha.

"There is no way back either," the coachman said in his rumbling voice. "All the roads have been drifted over." Standing up the box, he peered into the distance and, his eyes fixed on the grand piano, said: "I see the Dragon coming. He has three legs, he has a countless number of white and black teeth in his mouth, and his one eye is huge and flashing. He clicks the ground and leaves a dead trail behind him. Men, let us give battle to the enemy!"

Mitya jumped down from the sleigh. Volodya gave him a disappointed look.

"Olya, you'll be a man too," he told his sister.

Manyasha wanted to tag after Olya, but Volodya said briskly: "You, woman, stay with Mummy, and we shall defend you."

The wall lamp shed a wavering circle of light on the lid of the grand piano. But it was no longer a grand piano—it was Dragon himself advancing on his three legs, and showing rows of gleaming white and black teeth in his evilly grinning mouth.

"To battle! Olya, stab him in the mouth while I hack off his hind leg. Mitya, mind his front paws!"

Volodya, Olya and Mitya rushed at the enemy with whoops. Manyasha jumped up and down in the sleigh, dying to join in the fray.

The battle cries and the noise put Sasha and Anya off their chess game, and they wanted to play, too. Even the children's father emerged from his study, affected by the general excitement. He took up his stand behind the rubber tree and loaded the cardboard cannon.

"Wham! Wham!" Volodya shouted every time he hit the Dragon. All at once he jerked forward and wound his arms round the piano leg—the Dragon had got a hold on him. Volodya twisted and writhed, kicking furiously at the Dragon, and desperately tried to free himself from the monster's clutches. In the meantime, Sasha had crawled under the piano and was striking blow after blow at the Dragon's belly. Olya placed her fingers on the keyboard and cried:

"Ouch! The Dragon has bitten my hand, I'm gravely wounded!"

Anya led the wounded warrior to the sleigh, and rushed to help her comrades. But Olya did not think it much fun sitting in the sleigh and playing wounded, so she went into battle again, using her left hand only.

"Boom!" A cracker burst behind the rubber tree. Father was a good gunner, and the cannon ball hit its mark.

"Daddy has knocked out the Dragon's eye! Hurray! Hurray!" shouted Mitya.

"Good shot, Daddy," Volodya said encouragingly to the new recruit.

Sasha helped Volodya to get his arms free, and together they chopped off the Dragon's paw.

Manyasha slid down from the chair, and ran to deliver the final blow to the dread Dragon.

Mother sat down at the piano and played.

... The Dragon was advancing on them, a terrible, firebreathing monster. Brave, strong people went forward into battle against him. Mother's fingers flew over the keyboard. Fire! The Dragon was hit in his solitary eye. Blinded, he became more ferocious than ever, but the

people were more determined now, and their sight was all the keener. Success lent them strength. Strike once more! The Dragon moaned and groaned, he twisted and turned, and then he died. Crashing chords in the lower register....

"He's quite dead now," Volodya said, laughing, as he crawled out from under the piano.

Father lowered the oil lamp, suspended from the ceiling on a cord, and lit it. The drawing-room took on a bright, festive look. The Dragon vanished.

The battle-weary fighters sat round their mother and listened to the song she sang for them:

You may know care and grief in life,
No childhood lasts forever.
Sleep tight, my son, grow big and strong
For struggle and endeavour....

Translated by *Olga Shartse*
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